Sustaining Change in Every Classroom

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Visit www.saintpaulfoundation.org for more information about Words Work!

It was 2005 and our partnership was at a crossroads. Words Work! and Community Action Head Start had been working together for seven years to provide training, consultation, mentoring, and resources to teachers in pilot classrooms as they learned to implement effective early literacy strategies. Now we wanted to expose all classrooms to this approach so Community Action Head Start (CA Head Start) could continue achieving successful results after foundation investment ended. Demonstration projects, pilot projects, and initiatives often begin with the purpose of demonstrating best practices. To ensure success and research validity, projects execute their approach in a few classrooms within a larger program or an independent entity is established. Regardless of how a project is set up, too often implementation ends when the project and its funding ends. Partner organizations struggle to incorporate the desired components into action, but with diminishing funding, less outside assistance, and other challenges demanding attention, they may implement only small portions of the recommended changes.

As we worked to sustain change in the entire organization, we faced the com-plexity of this transition. It required involving all levels of the CA Head Start, sustaining resources such as funding, materials, and consultants, and building on the current strengths of the organization against a backdrop of reduced federal funding and escalating costs. We faced challenges and decisions. How could we, with decreased funding, both from within Head Start and from foundation grants, implement these changes? How could we ask more of teachers when at the same time demands were increasing on several fronts: the National Reporting System, a revised Program Review Instrument for Systems Monitoring of Head Start and Early Head Start Grantees (PRISM), and inter-nal administrative changes? We became aware that planning and realizing a *pilot* project requires different strategies than planning and realizing *integration*.

Reflection leads to sustaining change

In its work with teachers, Words Work! developed a culture "where ongoing assessment, reflective dialogue, and collaboration contribute to continuous learning" and changes in early literacy instructional practice (Patterson & Rolheiser, 2004).

We used the same reflective process with classroom staff, administration, and support staff as we examined sustaining change within the organization. The process led to asking more complex questions, anticipating possible implications, and looking more closely at institutional practices. Our successes, missteps, and shared reflections led to the following suggestions about sustainability from each partners' perspective:

Sustaining change: From the point of view of the funding partner

Discuss and agree on shared values, mission, philosophy, and assumptions up front. Words Work! began its planning from the question, "What's good for children and families?" and expected the partner organization to share this value as they developed shared ownership of the project. **Start small and scale up as initial concerns and problems are solved.** Words Work! began with a few classrooms. Throughout the first few years, participants discussed, "What's working?" and "What's not working?" Armed with this knowledge, staff included more classrooms each year.

Provide financial, material, and personnel resources for the pilot project and the integration. Extending project practices into all classrooms requires an infusion of materials, training, and mentoring. The CA Head Start didn't have the money or staff to provide these supports. The Saint Paul Foundation regarded integration as a priority and funded it as such.

Use contracts and agreements to introduce mutual accountability, clear understandings, and clarify shared values. The foundation designed a contract that spells out clearly what they promise to do as well as what they expect. Words Work! project staff and CA Head Start staff met regularly to revisit the contracts and monitor progress.

Assess the organization to determine strengths, history, areas for growth, and desired results. Integration plans cannot be developed and implemented without understanding the unique functioning of the particular ongoing organization. The foundation for success must already be within the organization. Words Work! and CA Head Start staff explored together what was present to support and sustain change. Building on strengths such as the program's curriculum or educational philosophy ensured changes will remain long after the pilot is gone. Words Work! linked with leadership at all levels of the organization to build support for the changes.

Identify key practices and embed them. Identifying the project elements, goals, and practices that lead to successful results requires joint analysis by the program and project. After identifying the elements the parties decide how to implement them, adapting to the program assets and limitations. For example, initially Words Work! provided funds to hire literacy mentors to coach and support teaching staff. However, this option was too costly to continue. CA Head Start chose to adapt this element by setting up training centers with mentor teachers. These mentor teachers trained new teachers into the Words Work! way as well as taught children in their classrooms.

Sustaining change: From the point of view of the partner organization,

Be wary of projects that propose to "fix" the partner organization. As you explore the partnership, come to mutual agreements about how it will work in your organization. Ask for project demands and expectations up front.

Formulate how program strategies would best work in your organization given budget and time constraints. For example, Words Work! put a high value on reflection, especially group teacher reflection on classroom instruction, but CA Head Start has a packed schedule for training on Fridays. To ensure Words Work! had the time to hold team meetings for teacher reflection, the program set aside time on the third Fridays as Words Work! Days. Words Work! only held its team meetings at the allotted times.

Continue building program quality throughout the project. CA Head Start built off the Words Work! value of reflection by training center managers in reflective supervision. As another strategy to increase program quality, the CA Head Start educational team formed

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Why do so many projects fade away?

- Short-term investment by funding source

- Short attention span of funders

- Lack of planning and thought put into sustainability initially

- Lack of financial and consultative assistance for organizations as staff embed changes in structure

- Projects do **to** organizations . . . **not with** organizations

- Imposing expectations without regard for the program's strengths and limitations

- Trying to change programs too much

a committee to write the CA Head Start Educational Philosophy. They asked Words Work! project staff to participate.

Consistently improve communication. Help staff understand the scope and

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> ## The Words Work! Approach to achieve goals for children
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> Words Work! instituted the following strategies:
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> ■ **Early Literacy Goals:** Words Work! has five early literacy goals that form the basis of the training, assessment, and instruction.
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> ■ **Professional Development:** All teaching staff participate in training and mentoring in early literacy concepts and instruction. Mentors give teachers feedback through observation and reflection. Teachers are encouraged to share their ideas and activities through team meetings and small learning communities. All classrooms are given resources and materials that are linked to the goals.
>
> ■ **Use of Assessment:** Teachers analyze the aggregated data they collect in children's assessments and use that analysis to plan further instructional strategies and measure progress towards the goals. Ongoing evaluation leads to continual improvement.
>
> ■ **Family Engagement:** Head Start staff involve families in accomplishing the goals through lending libraries, literacy kits, and family fun nights. Teachers share the children's progress during conferences and home visits.

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expectations of the project. Explore implications for teachers, managers, and other administration. Invite feedback about the implementation and results of the project. If there are other initiatives within the program, coordinate their communication so staff aren't burdened with competing demands.

Develop collaborative decision-making. Present the vision and then ask how it can happen. Embrace everyone's perspective as they discuss how to continue implementation. CA Head Start found the Words Work! data debriefs extremely helpful for teaching staff. Once they had heard and analyzed the data, teachers found planning goals for their classroom group as well as for individual children more meaningful. Head Start Educational Coordinators decided to introduce debriefs into all 38 classrooms. The Educational Coordinators designed a template that could be used by all sites. Collected data was organized and charted. Each site plugged its numbers into the template. The template also gave them an outline for discussion. This practice developed during the pilot is now embedded in the ongoing institutional system.

Celebrate big and small accomplishments and keep moving forward. Set short- and long-term goals with timelines. Then celebrate with staff as they are reached. Be ready to set new goals that move towards the organizational vision. It is easy to get bogged down or overwhelmed with daily demands, so visit the vision periodically to get renewed.

Build leadership throughout organization. As the organization incorporates new practices, help staff understand their role in moving change ahead. Value everyone's contribution. For example, literacy mentors conducted assessment, designed checklists, and led training. Teachers were asked to

train and demonstrate to other teachers. Educational Coordinators planned and wrote training modules for the training centers.

Supporting staff in the change process

The Words Work! approach was built around supporting and upholding teachers as they learned to implement new teaching skills. But learning new skills brought additional stress to teachers already burdened with increasing demands. The following suggestions eased the pressures on staff brought on by the new expectations:

■ **Plan for a multi-year process**. Moving from a pilot to full implementation is a developmental process and requires time. It often took as long as three years for teachers to fully convert new practices into "business as usual."

■ **Reflect on the process continually**. Ask teachers, coordinators, directors, and all other pertinent staff to address what's working and what's not. Invite them to help solve the dilemmas that remain. By building mutual accountability and focusing on what's best for children and families, all staff feel a part of the larger vision.

■ **Be responsive to people's concerns:** Think and ask about how staff are being affected. What are their perspectives, fears, and hopes? How will they be personally affected in their daily work? Are there adequate resources and programmatic supports in place as the full implementation progresses? Does everyone have an opportunity for input? Focus these questions on staff throughout the organization, but be especially attuned to the needs of the teaching staff as they learn new skills.

■ **Be flexible and adaptable:** When expanding the project, remain flexible and adaptable. Identify the unique challenges of the partner program and work to address them together. For example, CA Head Start staff are asked to fulfill performance standards throughout the program. Project staff aligned all Words Work! goals to the performance standards to increase consistency in expectations. All meetings and trainings were planned around the packed schedules of teachers and center managers.

The longitudinal data indicates that the children are continuing their gains as they enter the upper elementary grades (Cheung, Rodriguez, Butler, & Donovan, 2005). These results provide further incentive for our partnership to sustain the changes the project has brought. Jeanne Dickhausen, one of the CA Educational Coordinators, reflects on that change: "One of the most important contributions that Words Work! brings to our Head Start classrooms is not something that you can reach out and touch. It is Words Work!'s intentional development of a teacher's skill that makes the biggest impact on classroom strategies and how much children learn." CA Head Start and Words Work! are working in partnership to bring that investment to all of their teachers.

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